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Sailing into Character

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Character is important – this is hard to dispute. How we develop, nurture or grow character is the subject of more debate. Most of us have experiences that we attribute as important in contributing to who we are and what we hold to be of value. For some people this is related to school and often associated with organisations such as guides and scouts.

The importance of character and more specifically character formation was recognised by the German / British educator Kurt Hahn. In 1934 he founded Gordonstoun School in Moray and the first two students were sent to build a boat each at the local harbour (Hopeman). After two years the clippers were launched and subsequently used for various journeys. Hahn saw the value of apprenticeship and the collection of different subjects that building boats could bring together. This interdisciplinary approach to learning is something that is returning to fashion and can be seen as central to, for example, the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence. Hahn saw the experiences of building boats as contributing to character which he saw as important because he had identified five decays in society:

1. The decay of fitness due to our modern methods of locomotion
2. The decay of self-discipline helped by stimulants and tranquilisers
3. The decay of enterprise due to the widespread disease of *spectatoritis*
4. The decay of skill and care helped by the decline in craftsmanship
5. Above all the decay of compassion which [Archbishop] William Temple called spiritual death.

The first school Hahn started (Salem) was based on seven laws which might also be thought of as seven features of character education:

1. Give children the opportunity for self-discovery
2. Make the children meet with triumph and defeat
3. Give the children the opportunity of self-effacement in the common cause
4. Provide periods of silence
5. Train the imagination
6. Make games important but not predominant
7. Free the sons of the wealthy and powerful from the enervating sense of privilege.

Hahn subsequently went on to inspire four organisations that all remain concerned with character education in some way or another: Duke of Edinburgh Award, Outward Bound, Round Square Schools, and United World Colleges. Furthermore he inspired the foundation of the Sail Training Association in 1956 which has since developed into Sail Training International who organise tall ships races annually.

Sail Training ... or Education through sailing is a fascinating approach to Character Education and one which we believe to be worthy of attention. Emerging research on the processes and benefits of sail training relates closely to the seven features of character education that Hahn felt so important.

The challenge for a young person of stepping into an environment they do not know; with people they have not met before; having to learn a new skill and tackle problems in real time; without the ability to pause, rewind and try again is part of what makes Sail Training such a unique environment for character education.

In Sail Training the task as a whole is very simple: to get one boat and all its crew from point A to point B. What young people learn is that every step involved in this task requires: teamwork, self-motivation, leadership, compromise, imagination and the ability to make a mistake (in public) before standing-up and trying again. This last one in particular is something today's young people are getting fewer chances to experience in the modern world.

Young People who take part in Sail Training discover that not only do they learn skills they associate with sailing – seamanship, leadership and teamwork but they also develop a much greater understanding of themselves. When on a sail training voyage many young person reach some form of “breakthrough point”, whether it be through tiredness, struggling with a new skill, adjusting to the confined living conditions or working with different personalities. By reaching this point in a group environment that does not allow for much privacy they learn that triumph and defeat go hand in hand. This not only draws the young people closer as a team but also gives the individual young person vital character experiences that are often required in later life. These are experiences and skills that cannot be taught in a classroom or even on social media!

These young people in the space of a week: laugh, cry and learn together. It is once they return to their normal environment that they have time to reflect and look back on the experiences and skills they have developed; a vital part of character development.

Alistair Carter and Pete Allison (OYT Scotland and The University of Edinburgh respectively)

Interested in learning more? We suggest a look at these web sites:

<http://www.oytscotland.org.uk/>

<http://www.sailtraininginternational.org/>

<http://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/tall-ships-today-9781472903464/>

www.ed.ac.uk/education/pete-allison